

# Zimbabwe's Political Transition: Issues for Congress

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In mid-November 2017, spurred by an [intraparty rivalry](#) within the ruling Zimbabwe National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party to succeed then-President Robert Mugabe (age 93), the Zimbabwe Defense Forces (ZDF) seized control of key national political and military facilities. The ZDF then reportedly pressed Mugabe—head of state since independence in 1980—to resign, reverse his recent dismissal of Vice President Emmerson [Mnangagwa](#) in favor of Mugabe's wife, [Grace Mugabe](#), and halt a ZANU-PF purge of Mnangagwa's supporters. (See CRS Insight IN10819, *Zimbabwe: A Military-Compelled Transition?* and CRS Report R44633, *Zimbabwe: Current Issues and U.S. Policy*.)

ZANU-PF subsequently [removed Mugabe](#) as party leader, appointed Mnangagwa as his interim successor, and expelled Grace Mugabe and several of her allies. Mugabe resigned as president on November 21, preempting impeachment proceedings initiated against him. Zimbabweans' initial reactions to the ZDF intervention appeared broadly positive.

## Succession: Mnangagwa Becomes President

ZANU-PF then nominated Mnangagwa to serve as national president, nominally in [accordance with the country's constitution](#)—although this has been [contested](#)—and Mnangagwa was sworn in on November 24. In his [inaugural address](#), he vowed to

- serve all citizens “regardless of ... political affiliation” or other characteristics;
- protect foreign direct investment (FDI), increase liquidity in the economy, and service public domestic and foreign debt obligations;
- relax trade procedures and related transaction costs, and seek to foster export growth;
- prioritize agricultural development and foster a job-creation-focused economic recovery, including by attracting FDI; and
- pursue “re-engagement” with foreign nations, including those which “have had issues with us,” and request that those that have maintained “economic and political sanctions against us ... [to re]consider” such measures.

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Mnangagwa also pledged to compensate farmers from whom land was seized under Mugabe and “urgently and definitely” address land tenure reform—but also offered a mixed message on land tenure, a highly contested issue, by stating that past land redistributions and related policies decisions “cannot be challenged or reversed.”

He also quashed prior speculation that the 2018 elections might be postponed, and called for an end to corruption, illicit foreign currency exports, and cross-border goods smuggling. He also later called for “illegally externalized funds and assets” to be repatriated, and announced a three-month amnesty from prosecution for those returning such assets.

## Prospects Under Mnangagwa

While Mnangagwa’s inaugural address suggests that he plans to pursue a reformist agenda and govern in an inclusive manner, he has a long-standing reputation as a hardliner within ZANU-PF, which has a history of [suppressing the opposition and civil society](#). He is also a former top security sector official, and was reportedly complicit in massive [human rights violations](#) in the 1980s targeting a former liberation war faction. Mnangagwa also reappointed as Finance Minister Patrick Chinamasa, a former Justice Minister viewed as responsible for many repressive laws and legal actions.

Mnangagwa is expected to announce his full cabinet soon. Whether he [may appoint opposition figures](#) to the [cabinet](#)—potentially including [Movement for Democratic Change \(MDC\) leader Morgan Tsvangirai](#)—[has yet to be seen](#). Should Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF allies attempt to [sideline](#) the opposition or not robustly pursue the reform agenda he has set out, ZANU-PF might face political risks, given Mnangagwa’s untested electoral strength, widespread socioeconomic [discontent](#), and an uncertain post-Mugabe political landscape.



## Issues for Congress

Zimbabwe’s transition could provide the United States with a crucial opening to advance long-standing [U.S. assistance](#) and [congressional](#) objectives in Zimbabwe. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [called](#)

Mugabe's resignation an "overdue" and "historic moment" for Zimbabwe, which he said "has an extraordinary opportunity to set itself on a new path." He also called for "free and fair elections" and for "Zimbabwe's leaders to implement much-needed political and economic reforms." The State Department also urged "[unwavering respect](#) for the rule of law and for established democratic practices."

### Zimbabwe: Congressional Role

Congress has repeatedly addressed Zimbabwe's political future in [hearings](#) and shaped key aspects of U.S. policy toward the country, notably by passing the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act of 2001 ([ZDERA](#)). ZDERA prohibited U.S. support for multilateral debt relief and credit for Zimbabwe's government pending free and fair elections, credible land reform, security force subordination to civilian leadership, and adherence to the rule of law—particularly regarding civil freedoms and property rights. It also called for U.S. sanctions against persons undermining the rule of law or abetting political violence. Later-enacted [executive branch sanctions](#) target persons who engage in such activity or participate in public corruption. Congress has also restricted and conditioned assistance to Zimbabwe in annual appropriations legislation.

Subsequent U.S. responses, if any, are likely to depend on Mnangagwa's record in office and the relative credibility of the 2018 elections. If U.S. policymakers view his actions as negative, they might respond with new [targeted sanctions](#), censure, and other tactics to compel change. Should they, instead, see Mnangagwa and/or his potential post-2018 successor as actively pursuing a credible agenda of governance reforms and other actions aligned with U.S. bilateral objectives, they might be willing to provide assistance to help foster such aims.

One option for doing so would be to provide intensive technical assistance—potentially in close coordination with Zimbabwe's other development partners—aimed at ensuring that Mnangagwa is able to fulfill his inaugural vows and the attainment of related key U.S. goals, such as the following:

- **Ensuring [free and fair elections](#)**, including through electoral technical assistance and robust domestic and foreign election monitoring.
- **Reversing [negative economic trends](#)**, possibly accompanied by a strongly conditioned deal to clear Zimbabwe's large [international debts](#) and [arrears](#).
- **Robust rule of law and human rights capacity-building**, especially tied to full [implementation](#) of the [2013 constitution](#).
- **Accountability for [diamond revenue](#)**, both [past](#) and future.
- **Transparent [land reform](#)**, as outlined in the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA), and support for agricultural development and reform.
- **[Security sector reform](#)**.

Congress could also potentially

- review [ZDERA](#) and consider successor legislation tied to current circumstances; and
- consider setting out explicit conditions that would have to be met in order to prompt U.S. consideration of changes to the [current U.S. Zimbabwe sanctions](#).

## Author Information

Nicolas Cook  
Specialist in African Affairs

Katherine Z. Terrell  
Fellow in African Affairs

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